

# The Photograph as Network

## Tracing – Disentangling – Relating: ANT as a Methodology in Visual Culture Studies

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### Abstract

*Inspired by actor-network theory (ANT), this article develops a theoretical framework for grasping the dynamic visual work of cultural memory. It introduces three sensitizing concepts derived from Latourian actor-network methodology, namely entanglement, relationality, and traceability, operationalizing them as methodological tools for reading the net-work of images. The objects of study are two visitor snapshots of the photographic exhibition, The Story of Soweto, at the famous Regina Mundi Church in Soweto, South Africa. I demonstrate that, when slightly adjusted for research engaging with visual materials, Latourian concepts are indeed productive for analyzing visual material and visual practices at memorial sites.*

**Keywords** snapshots, cultural memory, visual culture, ANT, tourism

In the study of photography, actor-network theory (ANT) as introduced by Bruno Latour, John Law, and Michel Callon, has been applied in quite a few ways, underlying, for instance, the entwinement of technology and social practice, the camera as social actor (Latour 1991), tourist photography (Jóhannesson et al. 2012), and the study of algorithms of digital photography platforms (van Dijck 2013). The photograph's inherent visibility, however – its visual

work – has not yet been approached as part of or as an actor-network in itself.

The research leading to my investigation of the (digital) photographic document as an actor-network is based on the following initial question: What can we learn about the dynamics of cultural memory by examining mundane accounts of touristic encounters with sites of memory? While looking at tourist snapshots at and of sites of memory with a methodology inspired by ANT and visual theorist Ariella Azoulay's notion of the event of photography, a new relational reading of the visual evolves. The work of Latour and Azoulay can be combined in an approach that captures the agency, the living, of the vernacular, often digital, tourist snapshot. Such a relational analysis of visual cultural memory includes the recording and becoming of the photograph – the practice of picturing and visual encounters with memories at sites – as well as the relations its visual content creates across visual culture.

I will, in this article, focus on and disentangle the event of the visual in such mnemonic acts, describing what it is that we see or are potentially able to see in the tourist snapshot, what we overlook when taking a snapshot, only noticing it later, because the snapshot itself remembers (Azoulay 2012), and what is being connected in visual materials. Central to this investigation is the understanding of the encounter with a site of memory via its visual materials and practices as a *networking visual association*.

I will outline how actor-network methodology helps us to gather all the participants in the visual "event" (Azoulay) of cultural memory work by following their *tracing activities*. Latour's methodological considerations let us treat and analyze the event of the visual in cultural memory as an "effect of collective activity" (Crawford XX) enacted by humans and nonhumans, by objects and other props. The "agency" of objects and media of memory, like photographs, has been analyzed in many classic texts from visual culture studies, such as those by Sturken and Cartwright in *Practices of Looking* (2001) and by WJT Mitchell in *What do Pictures Want?* (2005). In visual anthropology, the work of Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart has been ground-breaking in its grasp of the materiality of the physical photograph-as-print and its "archaeology of use." What is further needed in this current moment is an understanding of the digital image and its net-work in yet other nets: the Internet first and foremost.



Fig. 1: Candice Mncwabe's Instagram post from Regina Mundi Church. May 28, 2014. Reproduced here with the photographer's permission.

### Reading Tourist Snapshots Relationally

Let us look at the life of one such mobile visitor snapshot, and, in doing so, get a closer view of the work of photographs at specific sites of memory. Figure 1 shows Candice Mncwabe's Instagram post from her visit to the photography exhibition *The Story of Soweto* at the Regina Mundi Church in Soweto, South Africa, in May 2014.

Candice herself appears in the small, almost hidden photography exhibition on the gallery of the famous church that hosted political congregations during and after the Soweto Uprisings in the 1970s and was later home to hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Candice is posing with one of the exhibited photographs by Jürgen Schadeberg, called "Mandela in his Cell," taken on Robben Island during a visit to Mandela's former prison cell in 1994. The post also features a range of hash tags from Candice, such as #MySouthAfrica #OurJourney and #OurStruggle. These communicate to others that this exhibition is in fact about the anti-apartheid struggle and inform us that Candice feels attached to this, "our," struggle, being herself South African. Then there is the tag #ReginaMundi, which made it possible in the first place for me to

find, to *trace*, the snapshot.<sup>1</sup> It relates this snapshot to other snapshots by visitors to the site. This relation is enabled by quite a complex material actor, or rather, an actor-*network*: Candice, together with her smartphone, its screen, the Instagram app, an Internet connection, the frame she holds – and of course the person who took the photo of her, are all related in this image-cum-post (see also Callon & Law 1997).

What else is happening here? What can we see *in* her photograph? The walls behind Candice are tagged with little notes. Visitors have left their thoughts and feelings on the walls next to the exhibited photographs and next to other notes. And isn't that frame that she's holding supposed to hang on the wall, like others in the background? Yes, but for some reason, it keeps falling off, as I learned from following other images taken at the same site. I visited the church in 2012 during some of the rare periods when it remained in place, and I remember a weird bandage that was attached to it. The fact that the frame is sometimes detached from its destined spot on the wall motivates visitors to engage with it, for instance to take a photo of or with it, or to write a note on the walls that comments on how the frame fell down. When the frame is put back up, the note about its past travels remains (see Wiegand 2017, 236-8). These walls record an immense number of stories – more than just the story of Soweto, as the name of the exhibition would suggest. They attract very different visitors, who engage with the comments in different ways, with many choosing to preserve a memory of them in a photograph. The traceable tourist photograph itself then becomes an actor of memory, of *mediated* memory. The snapshot carries a mediation of memory in two ways. On the one hand, it is the tourist's memory of the travel experience which is mediated through the photograph, on the other hand, a snapshot of an object of memory – such as a photograph in an exhibition – further mediates the memory communicated in the original image.

People increasingly make public digitalized recordings of their encounters with a site of memory, an exhibition, or a photograph exhibited at a site. This makes both the individual work of memory and the associations of objects of memory like a tourist snapshot, increasingly *traceable* – as Bruno Latour notes in the following quote about readers' reactions to novels:

Apart from the number of copies sold and the number and length of reviews published, a book in the past left few traces. Once in the hands of their owners, what happened to the characters remained a private affair. If readers swapped impressions and stories about them, no one else knew about it. The situation is entirely different with the digitalisation of the entertainment industry: characters leave behind a range of data. In other words, the scale to draw is not one going from the virtual to the real, but a scale of increasing traceability. (Latour 2007)

Just like the reading traces of novels and their characters, the reactions to sites of memory and the memory media staged there become increasingly traceable. Snapshots of memorial sites are able to make new connections and literally distribute pasts and memories attached to them further. The memory work is not limited to the human capacity of remembering; it also emerges in entanglements of both human and nonhuman networks. Paraphrasing Ariella Azoulay's "event of photography," the resulting event of the visual, when visitors encounter sites of memory with their cameras, is "made up of an infinite series of encounters" (Azoulay 2011, 77), "a special form of encounter between participants where none of them possess a sovereign status" (70). The visual results from the collective effort of people, practices, technologies, places, pictures and objects. Entangled with cultural memory – the public reworking of (exteriorized) memories of the past in still new memories – it relies on mediation. Here, "mediation" as used by Latour is understood, on the one hand, as the ways that actors *translate*, even manipulate, a certain event, account or story, and, on the other hand, or even at the same time, how a photograph acts in an exhibition to communicate and further mediate the memory of the anti-apartheid struggle. Mediation describes how this memory is translated into new materials that in turn become actors on their own, like the comments that visitors leave on the walls of the Soweto exhibition and the snapshots of these comments that are published in an online travel forum, individual blog or social media account. The particular interest of these mediating interventions in cultural memory work is when we see them turning from performances to having competence (Latour 2014, 51). The exhibited photographs, the scribbled



walls around them, and the stories they work out obviously *afford* certain actions: Mediating memory therefore seems to be one of the competencies of this exhibition setup. It is reflected in tourist snapshots. I call these competent snapshot actors *appropriations*: the materialized, sharable, and creative outcomes of visitors' encounters with a memorial site (Wiegand 2015, 31ff). The photograph as actor of cultural memory can be read as a visual mnemonic network. The 'cultural' in memory refers to the many actors involved in mediations: It is the outcome of participating and sharing, of collective composition.

### **ANT and the Study of Visual Material**

The visual is both medium and technique of memory. Visual figurations and the realm of the visual itself work both as important intermediaries that transport views, and as crucial mediators that transform the stuff of memory, thereby maintaining it. Visual acts of memory are entangled, relational, and traceable, *transvisual*, forming a network of visual associations across a visual culture, enmeshed with visual practices (see Wiegand 2015, 15ff). Image work – especially with images that do not act as references or mere visualizations of research – has not been central to the work of actor-network theorists. ANT might also not be the most suitable method to engage with the visual. But it leads us away from 'image work or object work only' towards the composition of the visual as medium, technique, practice, and technology.

Visual anthropologist Sarah Pink argued in 2003 for a more collaborative approach to visual research (186). Most research that prominently engages with images (like art history and study of visual cultures) in some way still focuses on the researcher's interpretation of the image and its social or cultural (often semiotic and discursive) implications, without engaging with 'the people,' those who meet and read images in different ways – anthropology's main concern. While I fully support this observation, I wish to invert the argument for a moment – admittedly thus risking oversimplification. By investigating only the social practices by means of which photographs are produced, viewed, distributed, and shared, the visual materials' "content" – the visible participants *in* the image and the connections they make across visual culture – are often disdained or at least not fully fathomed. Methodologies and theoretic-

cal frameworks that help us to creatively balance between the two focuses are needed to confront the bias of individual disciplines and to unite research of the visual. We cannot forget the people (and other nonhuman actors) that join in photography and image-making, but we must also look closely at the image, as object and story, and take it serious as an actor – and a network – on its own. Building on this observation, I have been considering Ariella Azoulay's understanding of the event of photography and the photograph as platform. Azoulay takes the image itself as an operating space, a space to intervene in, so that the encounter with a concrete photographic image becomes a forum to (net)work. She writes (2011, 76):

The photograph is a platform upon which traces from the encounter between those present in the situation of photography are inscribed (...). Many of these traces are neither planned nor are they the result of an act of will. That which is seen, the referent of the photograph in other words, is never a given but needs to be constituted to precisely the same degree as the interpretations which have become attached to it.

The "event of photography," to deploy Azoulay's concept, is a mutual enactment of apparatus, photographer, and photographed scene (and all the actors present and performing in that scene, from buildings, things and other people down to the weather conditions, and of course the light conditions). I understand the tourist snapshot as the outcome of associations made between these actors. ANT proves helpful as a tool to disentangle the composition of snapshots involved in mundane memory work of visitors to a site. There are three premises derived from actor-network methodology which I consider particularly suitable for the study of the photograph's work in cultural memory today: entanglement, relationality, and traceability. I take my clues mainly from Latour but further develop all three concepts and methodological tools for the study of the visual in cultural memory.

### Entanglement

In its focus on the entanglement of the human and the nonhuman in meaningful action, ANT has a non-anthropocentric agenda.

Latour underlines the premise of symmetry, the symmetrical agency of objects and subjects, of humans and nonhumans. This symmetry essentially makes any dichotomization between the two impossible because they are already entangled (see also Hodder 2012). All actions are “an exchange of human and nonhuman properties inside a corporate body” (Latour 1994, 46); as such, the tourist snapshot is an outcome of the exchange of photographer, photographed scene, participants in the image, and future viewers encountering the photograph. The ‘stuff’ of memory is constantly set in motion by a range of actors – people, accounts, or technologies, as the disentangling of Candice’s Instagram snapshot illustrates.

### **Relationality**

An ANT study focuses on relations and associations, on how different actors work together in actor-networks. It implies observing how actors become tied (or untied) so that they enable and compose an action in a certain place at a particular moment, and which other actions are needed (or happen simultaneously) to make that particular actor act and the network function: What relations or associations does an actor build, how do actors socialize? This calls for a relational analysis of the photograph underlining its “compound realities.” It is “the product of a process of composition” (Callon & Law 1997, 170). Latour underlines this claim when writing that every action, also the taking of, getting ready or posing for, or the looking at a photograph, should be felt “as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled” (2005, 44). With regard to the task of disentangling visual materials and their inherent relations, the almost forensic interest we should bring to snapshots as cultural memory points to the third premise: traceability.

### **Traceability**

ANT works through tracing – following actors back and forth between the relations they make and the actions they are involved in via the traces they leave. Latour writes that “ANT is not about traced networks but about a network tracing activity. (...) No net exists independently of the very act of tracing it, and no tracing is done by an actor exterior to the net. A network is not a thing, but the recorded movement of a thing” (1996, 378). This implicitly makes



the researcher in my study part of the network of cultural memory that the exhibition space of *The Story of Soweto* enables and describes. The act of tracing implies watching how the actors zoom in and out of their actions. To trace also means to actively look for associations without postulating them in advance. When I think about the (after)life of a photographic image of an encounter with a memorial site, for example, my task is to map the relations and constellations that brought this photograph into existence, the connections the photograph makes while circulating. Thirdly – and this goes beyond the aim of a strict ANT study – we can trace the scene of associations that an entity *lists and shows*, not only the shaping of memory but also its ‘shape.’ As we already saw in Candice’s post, a snapshot of the scribbled walls in the Regina Mundi Church *traces*: i.e., it lists a range of participants as its visual actors. The shape and ‘content’ of the record is not of primary interest to ANT. Nevertheless, this specific shape is crucial in my analysis because it allows us to trace the work of cultural memory on yet another level of creative appropriation.

The following practiced relational reading transfers the traceability of accounts from the digital photograph and source to the site that it mediates and returns them to its mediator, the digital snapshot. The tourist snapshot is a brilliant example of how cultural memory functions, not least because it makes the memories communicated at tourist sights “migrate” (Baylis 2008, 4).

### Zooming in and out of Snapshots: Relating Statements

This snapshot by South African journalist Chris Roper, published on his former blog and tweeted on 5 June 2011, illustrates the composition of traces at Regina Mundi Church: first, it shows us one of the exhibition walls with all the comments. Second, as a photograph, it inscribes a particular situational and personal view of the exhibition walls online.

Roper’s “Graffiti” snapshot focuses on a comment by Mpho Scheeper, whose name suggests a local South African, who wrote on 23 June (no year specified): “Expresive Exposition. It could could not have told better. Deeply moving story of the struggle of the Azanian people. Mpho Scheeper 23/06”. Mpho Scheeper’s comment has been corrected (probably by himself) by crossing out the redundant “could.” Interestingly, he uses the term ‘Azania’ and not



Fig. 2: Chris Roper, "Graffiti," June 5, 2011.

South Africa or the colloquial Mzansi. Azania is an ancient toponym that refers to areas in Sub-Saharan Africa that in this context was most likely used to evoke a Black-ruled (South) Africa. Scheeper's term figures prominently in philosophical and political pan-African anticolonial liberation movements like the Panafricanist Congress of Azania and its armed wing, the Azanian People's Liberation Army, founded in 1959/60 in Southern Africa. Roper's snapshot thereby also imparts knowledge about this important emancipatory term and ignites interest in the empowering history of Black South Africans' struggle by literally giving Azania its own independent framed image: this snapshot.

Just below Mpho's statement are parts of a comment from Australians: "We have come from Australia to see your struggle. These wonderful photos capture the events that brought the changes we have seen in Soweto (...)". In between these bigger comments written with markers we find shorter ones like "the youth was our heroes" and "blacks for ever," alongside a range of South African nametags like "PAPI MABE HEILBRON" (a town in Free State, South Africa) or "Sibahle Mabaso." People from different places

with different insights about this Soweto site enter a dialogue on these walls for future visitors to join in.

Judging from the name given to the published snapshot, the photographer was attracted by a specific recognizable shape in an unusual place: he zooms in on (what looks like) 'graffiti' in a church, meaning that this is a rather untypical shot of a memorial (tourist) sight. What made Roper focus on that particular comment could be the straightforward and at the same time political statement and Mpho's slightly unconventional orthography, which is indeed eye-catching. People in general seem to be very attracted by individual comments on the wall and such photos make up the greater number of snapshots taken at *The Story of Soweto*.

The relationality of inscriptions and the actions we draw from them is one of surprises; The story told in the graffiti changes with our point of entry into the wall or via snapshot's frame. The snapshots help me to decipher the comments on the walls – from the lower left corner of the wall in the snapshot to the upper right corner and back again – to see what and who has been involved in the visible layering of these walls. The size and frame make the difference: at first, a small photograph (which, in terms of its resolution, is at the same time large) seems to offer a more compressed way of entering the stories told on the wall than the wall itself. Visitors' snapshots condense what is happening (what is at 'work') here for me (and for others) while also showing what interested the photographer, and, accordingly, what made up the event of the photograph (Azoulay): they put the scribbles, images, and visitors to the site into relation with the viewers of the snapshot.

## Conclusion

When we start to disentangle objects of cultural memory like the snapshot, we realize that a snapshot is neither simply a material image, nor is it merely what can be seen 'in' it; instead, it gathers all the acts and technologies that created it, alongside everything that was invisible at the time the photograph was taken, becoming visible when we later zoom in on it. We can even trace marginalized stories that are barely known on a global scale, like Mpho's story about Azania. The photograph is the manifested associations made between these actors, a Latourian actor-network. Furthermore, it culminates as inscription: it leaves a view of this net-work for oth-

ers to engage with it, adding to a visual cultural memory in an “infinite series of encounters” with the photograph (Azoulay 2011, 77). Visitors’ mundane photographic memories project the photographs and scribbled walls beyond the exhibition space, becoming proper agents, *mediators*, of memory themselves. Recalling Ariella Azoulay’s main claim (ibid), “the event of photography is never over. It can only be suspended, caught in the anticipation of the next encounter that will allow for its actualization”.

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### Note

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